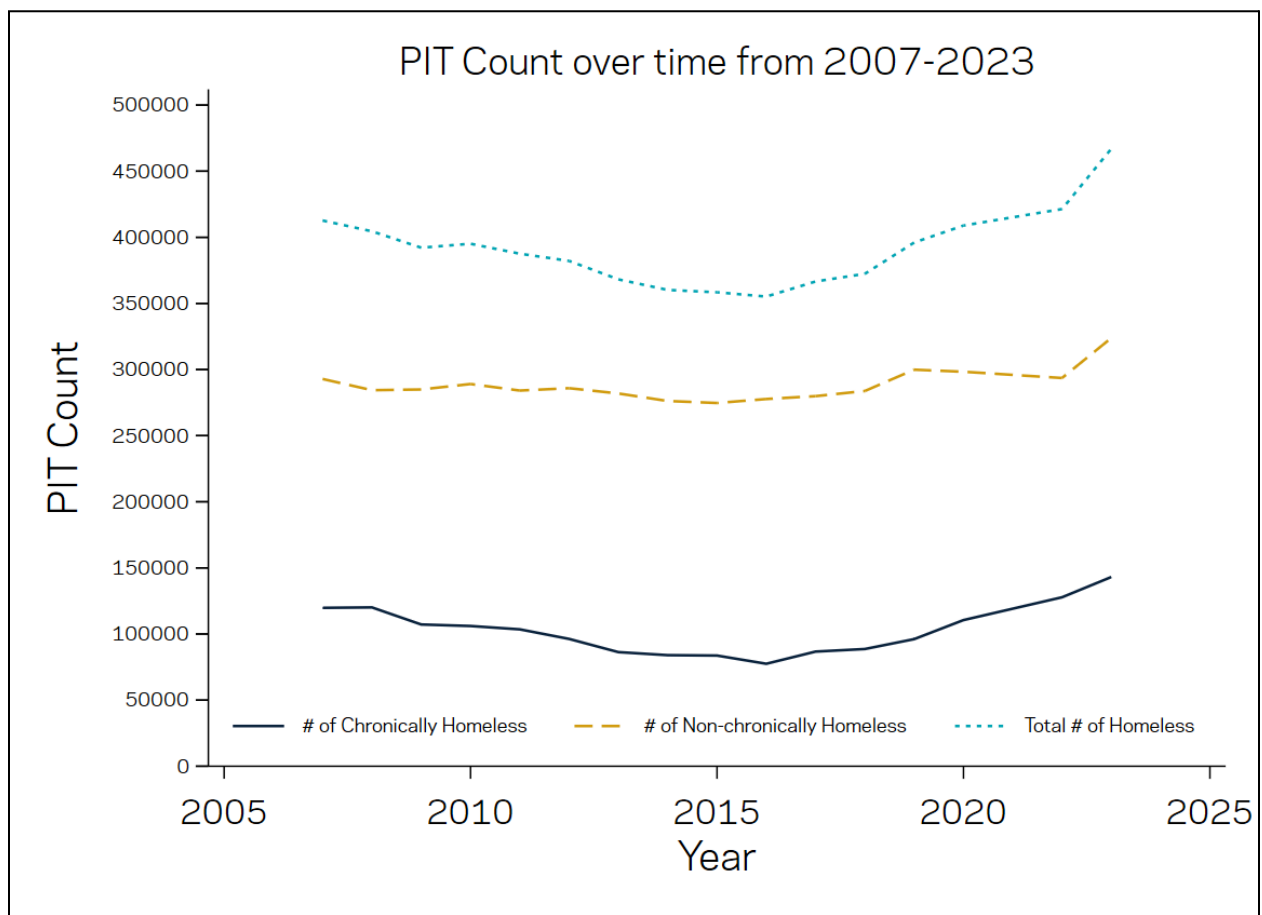


I. Introduction

The experience of homelessness continues to grow in the United States. Between 2013 and 2023, the Point-in-Time (PIT) count for the number of people experiencing homelessness increased from 590,364 to 653,104. Considerable attention rightfully goes to the growing number of people in situations of persistent, chronic homelessness, but at any point in time, more people are experiencing homelessness for the first time or through repeated shorter episodes. In the 2023 PIT count, 76% of people counted as homeless were not chronically homeless. These newer or episodic experiences of homelessness are also on the rise; increasing from 487,536 people in 2013 to 498,791 people in 2023. Rising homelessness represents a challenge both for those facing chronic lack of housing and those experiencing newer or shorter bouts of housing instability.



The challenge of multiple types of homelessness creates tensions in where and how to best respond with public policy. A large body of evidence shows that Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), an intervention which provides unconditional, long-term housing subsidies alongside free but optional behavioral healthcare services, effectively stabilizes housing for people experiencing chronic homelessness (Evans et al., 2021). But limited resources mean that nearly all communities have more people eligible and interested in PSH than available beds. These

resource limits have led to long waitlists for PSH and interest in options that could serve more people with the same resources. For example, Housing Inventory County data show that Rapid Re-Housing programs that provide short-term rental subsidies have grown rapidly, from 19,847 beds in 2013 to 144,765 beds in 2023.

Homelessness prevention programs provide one option that can serve a broader group of people. Homelessness prevention programs intervene much earlier with much more modest interventions before people lose their housing. Acting early allows prevention programs to serve more people with the same budget than a more intensive program would. On the other hand, it is more difficult for prevention programs to identify who to assist; even among those at risk of eviction, only a minority will become homeless (Collinson et al., 2024). Because of the trade-offs involved in early intervention, we should look to the evidence for guidance.

Evidence from studies that measure the impact of different homelessness prevention efforts can inform how best to intervene. This review summarizes evidence from studies that have two common features. First, they quantify outcomes that matter directly to people experiencing homelessness. In particular, this review includes studies that evaluate programming based on measurable aspects of housing stability and quality-of-life measures that flow from housing stability, like health. Second, they must measure the impact of prevention efforts by comparing program outcomes to a counterfactual, a credible measure of what people would have experienced in the absence of the program. To this end, this review focuses on results of randomized controlled trials (RCTs), which infer the counterfactual using a randomly-assigned control group, or quasi-experimental studies that approximate RCTs without random assignment. Comparing to a credible counterfactual is necessary for accurately measuring which programs are effective. For example, some very effective programs that work with very vulnerable people have far from perfect outcomes; participants in a supportive housing program in Denver spent an average of 38 days in jail in the past year, which might seem alarmingly high if not compared to the counterfactual 66 days in jail spent by a comparable control group (Gillespie et al., 2021). In this way, high-quality impact studies measure the difference that particular interventions make, allowing decision-makers to compare different programs on a similar basis.

This review summarizes a rapidly developing body of evidence about the effectiveness of homelessness prevention interventions. At least two recent reviews (O’Flaherty, 2019; Evans et al. 2021) already summarize the evidence on prevention programs. Some of the content of this review will necessarily overlap with these existing sources, in particular Evans et al. (2021). However, a need for a new review exists for at least two reasons. First, as will be apparent below, the set of studies rigorously measuring the effectiveness of homelessness prevention efforts has expanded rapidly to fill many of the holes in the literature identified in prior reviews. Second, public policy options available for preventing homelessness have evolved rapidly: the right to legal counsel in housing court has shifted from an idea to a reality in several jurisdictions, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an eviction moratorium and considerable expansion of temporary financial assistance programs, and so on. For both these reasons, this review

provides an updated accounting for the state of evidence on the effectiveness of homelessness prevention efforts.

Altogether, evidence from studies that clearly and rigorously measure impact indicates that homeless prevention efforts can be effective. Multiple such studies find that emergency financial assistance prevents homelessness. Legal aid can prevent evictions. Comprehensive, multi-dimensional program can also prevent entry into emergency shelters. The body of evidence clearly indicates that effective tools are available to prevent homelessness. Many questions remain, though, and this review concludes by discussing how further research can continue testing which innovative new programs and which modifications to existing programs most effectively prevent homelessness.

II. Rental assistance

A. Program description

Helping households pay rent is one of the most common homelessness prevention options. Typically, these programs pay rent directly to landlords. Other program design elements vary widely. Long-term voucher programs, like Housing Choice Vouchers, provide permanent housing subsidies that pay rental costs that exceed a certain percentage of household income and do so for a broad range of people with low income. Emergency financial assistance programs make targeted, smaller, temporary payments to cover rental debt; a typical option is a one-time payment of one month of rent on behalf of a tenant with an eviction notice. Such programs are incredibly common, with 93% of communities having such a program prior to the pandemic (211.org, 2015), and have expanded. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many state and local administrations expanded emergency rental assistance programs. Congress further supplemented ERA efforts by passing the Consolidated Appropriation Act of 2021 in December 2020 and the American Rescue Plan Act in March 2021. These legislative actions collectively earmarked an additional \$46.55 billion for ERA specifically for low-income households. Together, they were intended to alleviate both immediate and long-term impacts of pandemic-induced housing instability.

One challenge of emergency rental assistance programs is that they aim to identify—within the population of individuals at risk of homelessness—the subgroup of people who will actually become homeless in the absence of intervention. Such targeting is difficult. For example, Evans et al. (2016) find that only 2 percent of families seeking but not offered financial assistance end up entering a shelter. Even though a right to shelter makes use of emergency shelters more common in New York City, fewer than 15 percent of families go on to enter a shelter within two to three years after applying for services (Rolston et al. 2013; Shinn et al. 2013). Evidently, prevention service providers face a trade-off between intervening early when housing instability is less threatening and directing resources to those at greatest risk of homelessness.

B. Existing evidence

Long-term housing subsidies certainly prevent homelessness. For example, the Welfare-to-Work demonstration project randomly assigned people to be offered Housing Choice Vouchers among people already receiving TANF benefits. Leasing a unit with a voucher provided in that experiment reduced literal homelessness by 74% and doubling-up (i.e. moving into a home with another current resident) by 69% (Wood et al., 2008). A random assignment comparison of vouchers versus public housing in the Moving to Opportunity Experiment indicates that vouchers and public housing do not differ in their ability to prevent homelessness (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011).¹ While effective, such long-term subsidies are massively oversubscribed, leading to interest in options that could serve more households with the same budget.

A significant, growing body of evidence indicates that much more limited rental assistance targeted at moments of individual crisis also successfully prevents homelessness. A quasi-experimental study by Evans et al. (2016) in Chicago compared people who referred to one-time financial assistance versus not among callers to a homelessness prevention hotline. While this study did not use random assignment, the comparison convincingly measures the effect of assistance because whether funds were available for a particular household varied unpredictably and the study could observe and adjust for any other factors taken into account by the call center. Temporary financial assistance reduced shelter entry rates within 6 months by 76%. A more randomized controlled trial, Phillips and Sullivan (forthcoming), confirms these results, examining a similar temporary financial assistance program in Santa Clara County, CA. In a random assignment study, they find that people offered financial assistance are similarly 93% less likely to become homeless, mostly measured as declines in use of emergency shelters and street outreach. This study finds similar results to the earlier work in Chicago despite very different housing markets; for example, the American Community Survey (2018-2022) reports median rent of \$2,719 in Santa Clara County, CA and \$1,318 in Cook County, IL. Furthermore, the Chicago program limits funding to clients who can demonstrate future financial ability to pay rent, while the Santa Clara group does not and also allows participants to return for additional assistance. Altogether, these studies provide evidence that temporary financial assistance can reduce homelessness in many contexts.

Temporary rental assistance also affects tenants' lives in ways that extend beyond avoiding homelessness. The available evidence on this point also comes from the Chicago hotline study. Palmer et al. (2019) find that callers who are referred to financial assistance are 23% less likely to be arrested for violent crime over the next three years, though some of this gain is offset by increases in arrest for property crimes. Hungerman et al. (2024) find some evidence that employment and earnings increases for callers referred to assistance; these effects are concentrated among the lowest income callers. On the other hand, Downes et al. (2022) find no evidence that overall healthcare use changes when people are referred to assistance.

¹ Though beyond the scope of this review, a large body of evidence also supports the idea that long-term rental subsidies are also effective in providing housing to people who are already homeless. See Evans et al. (2021) for a summary.

Temporary rental assistance programs appear to have had less dramatic effects during the COVID-19 pandemic, likely due to other programs that were available for those facing homelessness, such as eviction moratoria and other direct cash payments to individuals . Descriptive comparisons of recipients versus non-recipients of such assistance show signs that recipients are better off (Reina and Lee, 2023); however, studies with a strong counterfactual find less evidence of large benefits. For example, the study period for Phillips and Sullivan (forthcoming) spans the start of the COVID-19 pandemic; all of the reduction in homelessness they observe happens prior to the start of the pandemic and none afterward. Similarly, evidence from cities that used random drawings to ration limited temporary financial assistance funds in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic show modest results. Collinson et al. (2024) combine data from lotteries in Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, and Seattle and find consistent evidence that being randomly selected to receive temporary cash or rental assistance led to some increases in rent payment and mental health but little change in rates of homelessness, housing instability, or financial well-being. These results suggest that temporary financial assistance was less fundamental during this national crisis, perhaps because of complementary policies, like readily available assistance through other sources and eviction moratoria, or because renegotiation with landlords was more possible during a crisis. Some caution should be taken in interpreting this evidence as it is still evolving. Currently, the most convincing studies focus entirely on early-pandemic programs that were smaller scale and less generous. Effects of larger, later rounds of assistance might differ, though early quasi-experimental evidence from Memphis suggests similarly modest effects (Rafkin and Soltas, 2024).

Finally, much less evidence is available for financial assistance options that fall between emergency responses and long-term housing subsidies. For example, “shallow rent subsidies,” which partially subsidize rent over an extended period of months or years, have become a popular middle ground. One study from Washington, DC did not find any evidence that such a program reduces homelessness (Alva et al., 2023). However, conclusions about program effectiveness of these types of programs are difficult given the current limited evidence.

III. Legal aid

A. Program description

The processes of housing court differ considerably from criminal court in ways that are challenging for tenants at risk of eviction. Courts tend to process a high volume of cases, taking only a few minutes per case. Schedules for hearings are unpredictable with a significant fraction of tenants not appearing for court. Attorneys typically represent landlords in these proceedings but the vast majority of tenants represent themselves. Together, these features make it difficult for tenants to comprehend and participate effectively in eviction proceedings (Fleming-Klink et al., 2023). Because they determine whether someone is evicted, these processes matter for preventing homelessness. Collinson et al. (2024) show that getting evicted in Chicago and New York quadruples the risk of entering an emergency shelter, relative to people with a case in housing court who are not evicted.

In response to these challenges, legal interventions provide one of the primary options for preventing homelessness. Traditionally, legal aid organizations provide legal advice or full legal representation in housing court, often focusing on cases with a clear path to a legal victory for the tenant. More recently, jurisdictions like New York City have rolled out a right to counsel in eviction proceedings, attempting to make housing court more similar to criminal court in which indigent defendants are provided with an attorney. Aiding tenants in housing court has become one of the primary methods for preventing homelessness.

B. Evidence

Full legal representation typically improves tenant outcomes in housing court. Multiple randomized controlled trials have studied random assignment of free, full legal counsel compared to self-representation among a set of people with an eviction filing. Studies in New York City (Seron et al., 2001), Massachusetts' North Shore (Greiner et al., 2013), and an on-going study in Memphis (Caspi and Rafkin, 2023) all find that being assigned an attorney dramatically decreases the likelihood that a tenant receives a judgment against them in housing court. For example, Caspi and Rafkin (2023) find that receiving an attorney cuts the likelihood of a judgment against the tenant in half. Together, these studies indicate that legal representation improves tenants' court outcomes, though none of these studies follows housing or other outcomes beyond the courthouse.

Quasi-experimental studies suggest that these effects on housing court outcomes remain when legal representation is scaled up to give all tenants a right to counsel. Large-scale right to counsel policies could have different effects from the smaller scale legal aid programs studied in randomized controlled trials for several reasons. For example, they might take on harder-to-win cases or over-tax the pool of effective housing court attorneys. However, evidence from the roll-out of "right to counsel" across ZIP codes in New York City is optimistic. While early results were more modest (Ellen et al., 2020), results from the first three years in Cassidy and Currie (2023) find similar results to smaller legal aid programs. When the city begins providing a right to legal counsel for all tenants in a ZIP code, judgments against tenants decline dramatically. Many questions remain about right to counsel, particularly whether landlords respond by changing their legal, applicant screening, or rent-setting strategies, but the existing evidence suggests it has similar effects on court outcomes.

Whether more limited legal aid could be as effective as full attorney representation is not clear. Many options are available, including more limited same-day attorney representation, non-attorney legal advice, and provision of self-help materials. In a different randomized controlled trial, Greiner et al. (2012) compare full legal representation to assigning a lawyer on the day of court and find no noticeable difference in outcomes, though a small sample size makes it difficult to draw strong conclusions. In a study in Tucson, Bernal and Yuan (forthcoming) find that providing information on legal strategies to tenants with eviction filings does not improve court outcomes for tenants, and may even lead to worse outcomes for some tenants. While evidence is limited given the large variety of policy options, existing evidence on legal interventions that fall short of full legal representation is thus far mixed.

IV. Comprehensive programs

A. Program description

Households facing homelessness often face a complex combination of barriers. Simultaneously working with landlords, navigating the legal system, managing expenses, gaining access to financial assistance, building long-term income, and accessing public benefits proves challenging and complicated. As a result, many homelessness prevention programs combine several elements. These elements can include specific services, like the financial or legal aid described above, but also typically have more intensive social service models built around formal case management or mentorship, often provided by social workers.

B. Evidence

Existing evidence supports the effectiveness of comprehensive homelessness prevention programs that provide assistance on many dimensions. Most of this evidence comes from the Homebase program in New York City. In a randomized controlled trial, Rolston et al. (2013) find that people offered a combined program of legal aid, financial assistance, and case management were less likely to enter emergency shelters. Goodman et al. (2016) show similar results at community level, demonstrating that shelter entries declined in neighborhoods where Homebase began operation.

The evidence is mixed on whether the different elements of comprehensive programs are mutually supportive or are better unbundled and provided separately. In the context of COVID-era Memphis, Caspi and Rafkin (2023) find that legal aid is much more effective when, in addition to direct legal representation, attorneys have the ability to connect tenants to financial assistance. On the other hand, Phillips and Sullivan (forthcoming) compare families in the Seattle metro area who are randomly assigned to a combined program of financial assistance and case management versus just financial assistance. In that instance, adding case management does not improve housing stability noticeably and, in some instances, leads to counterproductive limitations on access to financial assistance. These two instances suggest that careful attention to the interaction between program elements is both important and context-dependent.

V. Future research agenda

A. Existing programs with limited available evidence on impact

Shelter diversion programs aim to intervene as close as possible to the moment that a household loses their housing. The actual intervention varies, potentially including financial assistance, problem-solving conversations, or trying to negotiate with people who could allow a person back into their prior housing, but in all cases, diversion programs attempt to help a person who has up until the moment of intervention been housed but is about to become

homeless. This approach is promising to the extent that it can retain the benefits of standard prevention interventions while avoiding their downsides. In the ideal, diversion avoids the harmful experience of losing housing and is less expensive than responding later but is well-targeted toward people who would become homeless if not for intervention. This promise has led many communities to begin and expand diversion programs in recent years. However, it is not known whether this promise pays off in practice; this review did not uncover any completed studies measuring the impact of diversion programs. More research is needed on this innovative option and, more generally, on whether changing the timing of assistance can improve effectiveness.

B. Understanding impacts on outcomes beyond housing stability

While homelessness prevention programs most immediately aim to stabilize housing, the rationale for these programs assumes that they also improve quality of life for participants, and little rigorous evidence sheds light on these downstream effects. For example, this review found no studies of legal aid interventions that track outcomes beyond housing court. While the literature on financial assistance is more developed than for many other interventions, even there, the evidence on how it affects outcomes beyond housing all comes from one quasi-experiment in Chicago (Palmer et al., 2019; Downes et al., 2022; Hungerman et al., 2024) and a series of lotteries occurring during the unusual macro environment of the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (Collinson et al., 2024). Evaluations of comprehensive interventions fare better at tracking these outcomes but either have low statistical power for downstream outcomes (Rolston, 2013) or study program design rather than overall impact (Phillips and Sullivan, forthcoming).

A particular gap in the literature regards measuring outcomes for children. Households served by prevention programs are much more likely to include children than programs for people experiencing chronic homelessness, and the policy motivation for prevention often emphasizes the importance of minimizing disruptions and trauma for children. Despite this fact, all rigorous impact evaluations of prevention programs in this review focus on adult and household level outcomes with no measured outcomes for children. While this situation is understandable because children are more difficult to survey and require greater privacy protections for administrative records, the lack of evidence on how prevention programs affect children is glaring.

C. Designing effective programs

While existing evidence often focuses on which programs are effective and which are not, questions from practitioners also focus on program design questions. Which people should receive assistance from this program? How should financial assistance be disbursed? What kind of case management is most effective? The existing literature does not provide much evidence on many of these questions, and further research is needed to provide better answers.

Who should be eligible for prevention services is a fundamental question on which research progress seems to have stalled. Studies from New York City both established that targeting prevention programs at people who would otherwise become homeless is difficult and that using data to inform program eligibility rules likely could improve effectiveness (Shinn et al., 2013). The promise of using data to drive eligibility for prevention programs has been underscored by successful use of newer machine learning tools in other contexts, like violence prevention, where there is a similar need to identify people at high risk for rare but severe events (Bhatt et al., 2024), and efforts are underway to test the effectiveness of similar systems for homelessness prevention (von Wachter et al., 2019). However, to date, this remains a question on which little evidence is available. More generally, little guidance is available on how to match the right intervention with a given person.

Evidence provides little guidance on how much financial assistance to provide and in what form. Traditional financial assistance programs typically provide one-time assistance paid directly to a landlord, but whether this design is the most effective is largely untested. Larger amounts or repeated access to assistance are more expensive but may be more effective for the highest risk households. Providing cash directly to tenants is simpler to administer than paying landlords and provides greater flexibility but interacting with landlords may more directly stabilize housing. These questions regarding the ideal amount and form of financial assistance became particularly salient during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Especially in later rounds, federally-supported programs offered multiple months of assistance and gave jurisdictions flexibility in paying tenants directly. While the available evidence indicates that financial assistance did less to stabilize housing during the COVID era than during other times, it largely focuses on early programs that were more similar to traditional homelessness prevention programs. Less is known about the relative effectiveness of some of these later innovations of COVID response policy, like paying larger amounts or paying tenants directly, and how those alternatives would fare during more normal times.

Finally, how to optimally design comprehensive homelessness prevention programs is unclear. Evidence indicates that programs combining financial assistance, case management, and other elements can be effective (Rolston et al., 2013), but the multiple elements of such programs can also interact in both productive (Rafkin and Soltas, 2024) and counterproductive (Phillips and Sullivan, forthcoming) ways. More evidence on the best way to blend such program elements is needed. Also, such programs typically involve a case management component, and evidence on how to optimize elements of case management (intensity, continuity/turnover, focus of activities, etc.) is needed.

D. Understanding market responses

The vast majority of rigorous evidence on homelessness prevention focuses on how it affects tenants rather than the other side of the housing market. This makes sense initially; tenant welfare is in fact the goal of most homelessness prevention programs. But this research often ignores the ways that landlords will respond to prevention policies in ways that eventually affect tenants. For instance, landlords respond in strategic ways to more traditional housing subsidies.

They can capture the value of higher voucher amounts by increasing rent (Collinson and Ganong, 2018) and selectively market low-quality units to tenants with vouchers (Garboden et al., 2018). However, little is known about how landlords respond to homelessness prevention efforts in particular. Collinson et al (2024) suggest that limited benefits of COVID-era homelessness prevention programs for tenants could result from how the macroeconomic environment nudged landlords and tenants to negotiate rental contracts, but little direct evidence is available on how landlords screening and rent setting procedures respond to the availability of financial assistance.

Similarly, little is known about how landlords respond to legal interventions in housing court. The qualitative literature makes it clear that landlords strategically use the eviction process to manage rent collection (Desmond, 2016; Garboden and Rosen, 2019), and they use complex strategies to succeed in housing court (Fleming-Klink, McCabe, and Rosen, 2023). It seems likely that they would respond to large-scale changes in the legal environment. As discussed above, several rigorous studies demonstrate how providing legal aid can improve tenant outcomes in housing court. However, providing right to legal counsel at scale could affect the entire housing market, leading landlords to increase rent or screen risky tenants more carefully. An analogous situation arose with eviction moratoria during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies that compare across jurisdictions show that in the short run eviction filings fell in places that adopted strong eviction moratoria (Hepburn et al., 2023) and that this likely allowed tenants to increase non-housing spending and avoid mental distress (An et al., 2022). But landlords responded by screening out Black applicants more frequently (Arefava, et al. 2024). In the future, much more needs to be known about how such changes in tenants' rights ultimately affect tenants when landlords have the ability to adjust whether and how they rent housing.

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